

Obama, McCain and Russia's War on Georgia

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While I have lived, worked and frequently visited Georgia since 2002 and have written extensively on Georgian politics, I am not going to address the specifics of the conflict here. Instead, it might be useful to explore some of the questions which the conflict between Georgia and Russia raises for domestic politics in the US. The conflict has, appropriately, led to debate online and elsewhere about the limits, impact and attitudes of American power foreign policy. It has also, again not unsurprisingly, become an issue in the presidential race as Senator McCain has responded with blustery statements stressing Russian aggression and the need to defend Georgia, while Senator Obama has emphasized these points, but also stressed the need for partnership with Europe on this issue.

McCain has attacked Obama for being soft on the Russians and being "bizarrely in synch with Moscow". Red baiting like that is almost quaint, but unfortunately McCain was being serious. The contrast between McCain's bellicosity and Obama's more measured tones is more significant than their view of the war itself. They both seem to agree that Russia is the aggressor here and that the US should support Georgia in whatever way it reasonably can. However, McCain's approach has emphasized the need for the US to be tough with little regard for the need to build alliances and think through the broader issues.

Among the punditry and on the blogosphere, discussions seem to have moved in two directions. On the one hand we have seen combative rhetoric about Russian imperialism, a new Cold War, Russia's irrationality, the need to respond aggressively and Russia's inability to understand anything but force. Others have argued that Russia is doing nothing different than what we have done around the world, Georgia is an American puppet, and this a result of our foreign policy in Iraq, Kosovo and elsewhere over the last decades. While there are elements of truth in both those positions, they are both extreme and will not lead to meaningful solutions or progress in the region. The latter position is clearly a fringe one that is barely even relevant to the events in Georgia, but it shows that the impact of the disastrous US foreign policy of the last eight years has direct bearing on the difficulty that the US now faces in trying to craft an effective policy towards Russia and Georgia regarding this conflict and beyond.

An appropriately nuanced view of the US role and possible options regarding the events unfolding in Georgia now require all Americans regardless of partisan affiliation, view of the Bush administration or preference in the upcoming presidential campaign to simultaneously hold at least the following six ideas in their heads.

1. The US has dramatically overstated the strength of Georgian democracy and the democratic credentials of Saakashvili personally helping Georgia evolve, in the eyes of many, into a virtual client state of the US.

2. Because of our invasion of Iraq and other unilateralist actions we have lost any moral high ground on this type of an issue. Statements by people like Dick Cheney or George W. Bush that this is "unacceptable" or John McCain commenting that "in the 21st century nations do not invade nations" not only underscore this but demonstrate the extent to which the current leadership of the US is unaware of the damage we have done to ourselves over the last five years.

3. Saakashvili can be aggressive, arrogant and stubborn, but with regards to human rights he is not comparable to Milosevic as suggested by Russia. For this reason the Kosovo example is a very tenuous precedent on which to rest the Russian position. The Russian charges of ethnic cleansing by Georgians in South Ossetia have not been substantiated by human rights groups and are tremendously exaggerated. Russian claims of self-defense should be tempered by the recognition that no Georgian soldier or airplane has crossed an international border, shot a gun on Russian soil, or flown into Russian airspace.

4. Russia is capable of doing bad things. For many in Eastern Europe, this is evident, but for some in the US, our extreme, if understandable, focus on our foreign policy mistakes has obscured this important truth.

5. If Russia believes it has achieved its goals in Georgia without facing any consequences, it will likely continue to assert its new power over various neighbors. An emboldened Russia is not just a threat to some abstract and misguided sense of American superiority and dominance, but it is viewed as a great danger by millions throughout Eastern Europe. If Russia is not held accountable for these actions, their influence will almost automatically increase in the Baltic States, Ukraine, Poland and elsewhere. These countries will be less free and independent as a result of this.

6. South Ossetians and Georgians are both suffering because of this war. There are thousands of Ossetian refugees fleeing northward and thousands of Georgian fleeing Russian troops going to the capital and other safer parts of Georgia. Efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to all the victims of this war are essential.

Our policy towards Georgia has to reflect an understanding of all of this as well. While this may, in fact, be a key moment where it would be detrimental to the US and the world to let Russian aggression go unchecked, what that response looks like and who responds are extremely important questions.

While the fighting may well end soon, the fallout from this conflict will not go away. The questions of administering the contested regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, guaranteeing Georgian sovereignty, confronting Russia, and the broader role for the US and Europe in the region will be only some of the questions which this war will force the next president to face. The US can best stand up for our allies and against Russian aggression if we are able to build an consensus with our European allies, because without European support, threats to push Russia out of the G8, bar their entrance into the WTO, boycott the Olympics in Sochi, will be seen by the Russians as just talk.

Russia hawks, and friends of Georgia, would be wise to consider this when making a choice in November. We can be comforted by McCain's words which Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili described as "cheering", or we can reach our goals through Obama's more serious and pragmatic, but equally tough, approach.